

— A FIRST LOOK AT —  
COMMUNICATION THEORY

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# *Hierarchy of Needs*

## *of Abraham Maslow*

Think of someone who fits the following description: loving, fair, realistic, relaxed, self-sufficient, spontaneous, creative, nice. Make sure he or she also has an honest directness, a playful spirit, a history of successful risk taking, and a way of moving through life that seems effortless.

This is the kind of extraordinary person Brandeis University psychologist Abraham Maslow considered when he devised a theory of motivation fifty years ago. They are a rare breed—the Olympic medal winners of the human race. To Maslow, it made sense to examine the finest specimens of the species. So in order to discover exemplary qualities in the human race, he studied the lives of Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Jane Addams, Eleanor Roosevelt, Frederick Douglass, Martin Buber, Albert Schweitzer, and a few dozen others representing his definition of the brightest and the best.

### **THE THIRD FORCE: A REACTION TO PESSIMISTIC DETERMINISM**

Maslow realized that his method was a radical departure from the two standard psychological approaches to the study of human nature. The Freudian psychoanalytic school emphasized people's destructive tendencies. Consistent with the survival-of-the-fittest views of Charles Darwin, Freud saw no moral difference between people and animals. We may walk upright, but there's no reason to believe we'll act that way. Maslow thought that Freud's pessimism was a logical result of looking at the dark side of the human psyche. "The study of crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy."<sup>1</sup>

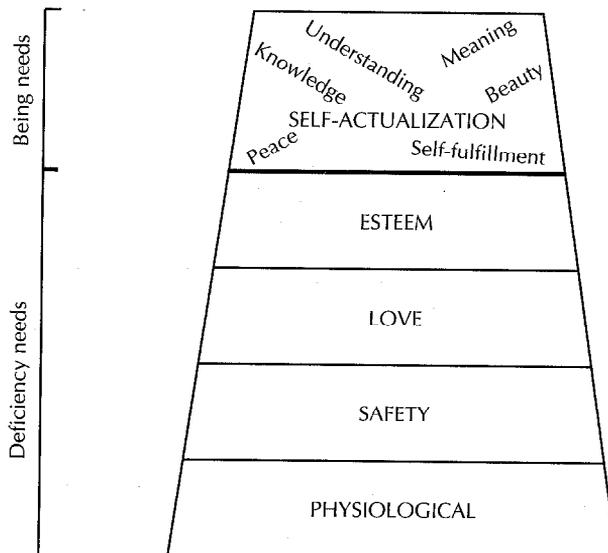
The behaviorism of B. F. Skinner offers little more hope. Since students of motivation spend most of their time studying the behavior of white rats, it's no wonder they construct need models based solely on hunger, thirst, sex, and the avoidance of pain. If we must do animal research, Maslow asked, why not study the playfulness of monkeys or the affectionate loyalty of dogs? He was also critical of behaviorists' tendency to ignore unique characteristics. When they finally get around to looking at people, they lop off individual differences and reduce warm bodies to cold statistical averages.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs offers an alternative to what he saw as the depressing determinism of both Freud and Skinner. To call attention to the differences between his optimistic view and their denial of human freedom and dignity, he labeled his approach the "Third Force." Maslow was convinced that when scientists finally examined the noble examples of human development, they would discover that people are basically trustworthy, self-protecting, and self-governing. Our innate tendency is toward growth; we are even capable of love. Maslow's theory is bullish on the human race.

## DEFICIENCY NEEDS MUST BE SATISFIED FOR GROWTH TO OCCUR

Maslow was not stupid. He could read the newspaper as well as anybody else and was saddened by the daily reports of inhuman deceit and violence. But that was exactly his point. Lying, cheating, stealing, and murder are not what he thought human nature was meant to be. These are aberrant behaviors that occur when legitimate human needs are thwarted. To borrow a line spoken by a gang member to Officer Krupke in the 1962 Academy Award winning movie *West Side Story*, "I'm depraved on account of I'm deprived."<sup>2</sup>

According to Maslow's theory, there are four types of needs that must be satisfied before a person can act unselfishly. As Figure 10.1 shows, the needs are arranged in a hierarchical order. The upward climb is made by satisfying one set of needs at a time. The most basic drives are physiological. After that comes the need for safety, then the desire for love, and then the quest for



**FIGURE 10.1**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Adapted from Goble, *The Third Force*.)

esteem. Note the softening of terminology used to describe the move up the ladder. We're *driven* to satisfy the lower needs, but we're *drawn* to meet the higher ones.

Maslow referred to the four lower needs as "deficiency needs" because their lack creates a tension within us. He saw nothing wrong with the human desire to scratch where we itch. As long as we can work to satisfy the cravings, we're moving toward growth. It's when a repressive society or a warped individual curtails our freedom to satisfy our needs that we become ill. Satisfying needs is healthy. Blocking gratification makes us sick.

The urge to fulfill needs is potent but not overpowering. Maslow thought that the Freudian label *instinct* overstated the case. Maslow used the term *instinctoid* to designate a less insistent motivational force. People *can* resist the pull of physiological, safety, love, and esteem needs, but it's not easy.

The instinctoid label also means that these needs are universal urges and not created by culture, as the behaviorist would claim. Although everyone has the same set of the needs, our ways of fulfilling those needs can be different. You could meet your need to belong (love and be loved) by going to a party, whereas your roommate might go for a quiet walk with a friend. Despite these different means of gratification, our common desire for love makes us brothers or sisters under the skin.

## LOWER NEEDS TAKE PRIORITY UNTIL MET

There is nothing unique about Maslow's focus on physical, safety, love, and esteem needs. Other theorists include these four in their lists of basic needs. The genius of the hierarchy is its concept of prepotency. A *prepotent need* is the one that has the greatest power or influence over our actions. Maslow claimed that everyone has a prepotent need, but the need will differ among individuals. You might be motivated by a craving for love, while I may be motivated by a desire for esteem. Which need is prepotent for a given individual? According to Maslow, a person's prepotent need is the *lowest unmet need* in the pyramid.

Not surprisingly physical drives take priority in Maslow's system. Almost all motivational theorists regard the needs for food and other physical necessities as powerful and primary urges. Fortunately for many people, these basic wants are usually well satisfied. What happens when there is plenty of bread and the belly is full day after day? Maslow described the shift in motivation that occurs when survival needs are met:

At once other (and higher) needs emerge, and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still higher) needs emerge, and so on. As one desire is satisfied, another pops up to take its place.<sup>3</sup>

What follows is a brief description of the deficiency needs in the order Maslow predicted they occur.

## **Physiological Needs**

Physiological needs are basic: The body craves food, liquid, sleep, oxygen, sex, freedom of movement, and a moderate temperature. When any of these are in short supply, we feel the distressing tension of hunger, thirst, fatigue, shortness of breath, sexual frustration, confinement, or the discomfort of being too hot or cold. These irritants compel us to seek the missing commodity so that our body can return to homeostasis—a system in balance or at rest.

As long as the body feels substantially deprived, it marshals all its energies in the service of satisfying these demands. Responding like a heat-seeking missile, a dog or cat invariably finds the one patch of sunlight that provides a warm place to doze. On the physiological level, Maslow sees people as no different. But once these physical needs are met regularly, they no longer exert pressure. A need fulfilled no longer motivates.

Weight Watchers advises that the time to go to the grocery store is after a complete meal. When we've had enough to eat, food becomes relatively unimportant. As hunger and the other physiological needs are met, the need for security kicks in.

## **Safety Needs**

The safety needs operate mainly on a psychological level. Naturally we try to avoid a poke in the eye with a sharp stick. But once we've managed a certain level of physical comfort, we'll seek to establish stability and consistency in a chaotic world. When he talked about security, Maslow pictured the child who strives for predictability and certainty. For instance, most kids enjoy a set bedtime routine and grow visibly distressed if a parent tries to short-circuit the ritual. Their safety needs require a consistent and secure world that offers few surprises.

Unfortunately, life doesn't always cooperate. Some of you who come from a broken or dysfunctional home know the cringing fear of waiting for the next fight or the other shoe to fall. Many adults go through life stuck on this level and act as if catastrophe will happen any moment. Political appeals for law and order are aimed at people whose insecurities have never been quieted. Maslow also placed religious inclination on the safety rung because he saw that tendency as an attempt to bring about an ordered universe with no nasty shocks.

## **Love and Belongingness Needs**

The love or belongingness needs come into play after the physiological and security drives are satisfied. Gratification is a matter of degree rather than an either-or accomplishment. But once a need has been significantly satisfied over a long period of time, it becomes functionally absent. The action switches to the next highest level, in this case, love.

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Maslow's concept of belonging combines the twin urges to give and receive love. Giving love is different from the passion of rock music lyrics that announce, "I want you, I need you, I'm going to have you." That's raw sex. And giving love is more than the maternal instinct implanted by nature. For Maslow, giving love is seeking to fill a void by understanding and accepting selected others. Receiving love is a way of staving off the pangs of loneliness and rejection. The man who attains this level will "feel keenly, as never before, the absence of friends, or a sweetheart, or a wife, or children."<sup>4</sup>

Even though it's higher in the hierarchy than physical or safety needs, the desire for love and belonging is similar in that it motivates only when a person feels a deficit. According to Maslow, love loses its pull when you've had enough. Thirty years ago he suggested that the desire for love and belonging was the lowest level of unmet need for most Americans. If the continuing popular appeal of *Cheers* reruns on television is a reliable indicator, his assessment still holds true today.

Maslow notes that the need for love is more fragile than the needs that go before. For example, this need is nonexistent in the psychopath, who feels no desire for warmth or affection. And some people get their esteem and be-

longingness wires crossed. They want respect before they want love. But for most of us, the prepotent order is as Maslow depicted it:

Physiological → Safety → Love → Esteem

### Esteem Needs

The esteem needs are of two types. There's self-esteem, which is the result of competence or mastery of tasks. Harvard psychologist David McClelland calls this "need for achievement." There's also the attention and recognition that come from others. Wanting this admiration is part of what McClelland labels "need for power." McClelland assumes that individual differences in needs are tied to personality, and they change slowly if at all. Maslow, on the other hand, believes that repeated shifts in motivation are possible when a person is in a supportive environment.

Consider the real-life case of Tony, who seemed to have everything going against him, yet he has risen to the esteem level in the hierarchy of needs. Tony was raised in the inner city of Chicago, the seventh child in a Hispanic family of twelve that lacked legal status in the United States. With his father working a minimum-wage job, Tony never had enough to eat. The lack of health care and sufficient heat in the winter guaranteed that Tony's childhood would center on his physical wants.

When Tony was 12 years old, extended welfare benefits plus financial aid from a local church combined to raise his family slightly above the poverty line. As food, warmth, and medical attention silenced his body's chronic aches, Tony began to worry about the twin threats of the immigration service and street gangs. He had risen to the safety level in Maslow's hierarchy.

The Amnesty Act of 1986 took away the fear of deportation, and a high school coach recruited him for an after-hours wrestling program that removed him from the constant hassle with gang members. With safety no longer a major concern, Tony started to feel the pull of his previously dormant needs to love and to belong.

As Maslow would have predicted, the last few years of Tony's life have been characterized by an increased interest in his brothers and sisters, friendship with his wrestling buddies, and a mutual fascination with a girl named Helen. Although his needs for love are only partially fulfilled, Tony now talks about making something of his life and has applied for financial aid to enter college. Maslow would cite these initial efforts as evidence that Tony has worked his way up to the esteem level of the hierarchy.

Contrast Tony's experience with a man who has been brought up in a comfortable, secure, loving environment. He has never known physical want, experienced danger, or felt separation from the people he loves. Unlike Tony, he will probably take for granted the blessings he already has. Because of the constant gratification he's received, this person might put up with all sorts of hardship, danger, and loneliness in order to gain a sense of worth. He

might even die for a cause. Maslow notes that it's easier to make sacrifices when you're never faced chronic deprivation. There are few martyrs from the ranks of those who have to struggle for existence.

## SELF-ACTUALIZATION: THE ULTIMATE GOAL

Maslow described the need for self-actualization as "the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming."<sup>5</sup> People feel this gentle but persistent tug to maximize their potential only after they have satisfied their basic deficiency cravings. Obviously, the comic strip character Charlie Brown, who bemoans the curse of great potential, has yet to reach that point.

Self-actualization can take many forms, depending on the individual. These variations may include the quest for knowledge, understanding, peace, self-fulfillment, meaning in life, or beauty. For instance, the aesthetic person operating on this level may feel physically ill when driving past an ugly array of fast-food restaurants with garish neon signs. But the need for beauty is neither higher nor lower than the other needs at the top of the pyramid. Self-actualization needs aren't hierarchically ordered.

You'll recall that Maslow set out to study fully functioning people who had grown past the discontent and restlessness that characterize the lower-order needs of the hierarchy. He found very few. People who fit his criteria turned out to be mature in years as well as in the process of living. Each was dedicated to a task or calling which would benefit others. Since they weren't people who need people, they were free to pursue a cause or vocation.

Most of us have trouble imagining ourselves on this transcendent plane, so Maslow developed a device that would give the uninitiated a glimpse of the self-actualized life. He asked people to describe the single most joyous, happy, or blissful moment of their life. Perhaps you'd recount a religious experience, a moment of sexual ecstasy, or a time when a piece of music took you to the heights. This peak experience would provide a taste of the fulfillment available to those who get beyond the deficiency needs.

Maslow's vision of self-actualization as the highest human attainment became a rallying point for Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Erich Fromm, and other humanistic psychologists. If not the founder of the human potential movement, Maslow certainly is a father figure to those who are part of the if-it-feels-good-do-it tradition. It's hard to imagine hordes of people lined up to hug Leo Buscaglia had not Maslow paved the way.

## RESEARCH SUPPORTS THE MOTIVES BUT NOT THE ORDER

No one can seriously question the impact of Maslow's theory. Millions of people have been affected by his ideas. But truth isn't determined by a head count. How has the hierarchy stood up under scientific scrutiny? The results

are mixed. Hundreds of empirical studies have supported the motivational force of physical, safety, love, and esteem needs. But the same studies have failed to discover a hierarchical or prepotent arrangement.

In the late 1960s a Dutch industrial psychologist, Gerald Huizinga, attempted to validate the theory in the workplace. Because of its scope and different cultural setting, Huizinga's study is one of the more ambitious attempts to verify the principles of the hierarchy. He surveyed over 600 managers drawn from five industries in the Netherlands. His sample included people from production, personnel, research and development, finance, and top management. They ranged in age from 20 to 65, and their educational backgrounds extended from the Dutch equivalent of grade school to university graduates.

Huizinga's book-length write-up demonstrates that he is a true believer in Maslow's theory. Yet no matter how many ways he analyzed the data, there was simply no evidence that workers had a single dominant need, much less that the need diminished in strength when gratified.

Despite the lack of systematic empirical support, it's hard to dismiss the idea that one overriding need governs our behavior until the desire is satisfied. When the body hurts, concerns for security, love, and esteem do seem to be pushed into the background. A true test of prepotency can only be made in a longitudinal study which lasts over a decade or more. The long time span would give the researcher a chance to spot whether or not changes in motivation follow the upward pattern that Maslow predicted.

## VALIDATION OF THE HIERARCHY IN RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

Not all truth comes out of a laboratory or from a survey questionnaire. Sensitive observers of the human scene can often spot a relationship before the behavioral scientist devises a way to test for it. Keith Miller is a Protestant pastor, lecturer, and writer who believes that Maslow's prepotency principle is validated in the makeup of religious congregations.

Impoverished people respond to a vision of heaven as a large banquet table that satisfies their physical needs. Believers on the safety level of the hierarchy are predisposed to favor pastors who preach about eternal security from the terrors of Hell. Those who are fortunate enough to have risen above the safety level tend to look down on adherents of "that old-time religion." They want assurance that God is love. But that warm message strikes many worshipers on the esteem level as self-indulgent. Faith to them means a sense of worth that comes from doing something of lasting value in God's world. And finally, individuals who feel tugs toward self-actualization respond most to calls for meditation and study.

Miller feels that all five approaches are legitimate, but each will seem ridiculous when viewed from above or sterile when viewed from below. He obviously finds Maslow's hierarchy a valuable analytical tool. Not all observers are so positive.

## CRITIQUE: MASLOW AS THE FATHER OF THE "ME GENERATION"

In a scathing critique entitled "Stepping Off Maslow's Escalator," social critic Daniel Yankelovich accuses Maslow of providing intellectual justification for the selfish individualism of the last two decades. Before agreeing with the charge, remember that Maslow's original cluster of self-actualized individuals consisted of people who no longer felt the tug of deficiency needs and were freed up to help others. Somehow this selfless component has been ignored by Maslow's disciples, and self-fulfillment has come to mean "look out for number one." Yankelovich notes that it's not fair to blame Maslow for the excesses of his followers, yet in the end he does so.

Perhaps Maslow was overly optimistic about human goodness. His idea of an innate, positive direction is hard to accept after watching a film on the Holocaust or reading reports of torture from Amnesty International. Certainly we have the *capacity* for good. But history doesn't support the claim that being trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, and so forth, is the dominant human tendency.

Maslow's theory of motivation does have a healthy emphasis on freedom of choice. He believes that the ability to respond is what makes us fully human. With this in mind, one might wish that he had placed more emphasis on responsible, unselfish commitment to others. For the past few thousand years, communication professionals have recommended that speakers concentrate on the needs of their audience rather than focusing on their own desires. In spite of the turned-in focus of the last decade, the advice still seems sound.

## QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. Maslow's *humanistic* approach was a reaction against Freudian and behavioristic psychology. How does the "Third Force" differ from these other two approaches?
2. Given that *safety* needs are lower in the *hierarchy* than needs for *love* and *esteem*, how is it possible that people might willingly die for their country?
3. What has been the single most joyous, happy, or blissful moment of your life? Does that *peak experience* square with Maslow's description of *self-actualization* as an unselfish state?
4. Is there any place for delayed gratification within Maslow's theory of motivation?

## A SECOND LOOK

*Recommended resource:* Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2d ed., Harper & Row, New York, 1970.

*Original statement:* Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 50, 1943, pp. 370-396.

*Recommended secondary source:* Frank Goble, *The Third Force*, Grossman, New York, 1970.

*Field research:* Gerald Huizinga, *Maslow's Hierarchy in the Work Situation*, Wolters-Noordhoff, Groningen, Netherlands, 1970.

*Religious application:* Keith Miller, *The Becomers*, Word, Waco, Tex., 1973, pp. 89-109.

*Critique:* Daniel Yankelovich, "Stepping Off Maslow's Escalator," in *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down*, Random House, New York, 1981, pp. 234-243.

*Critique:* Andrew Neher, "Maslow's Theory of Motivation: A Critique," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 1991, pp. 89-112.

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- 1 As cited in Frank Goble, *The Third Force*, Grossman, New York, 1970, p. 14.
  - 2 "Gee, Officer Krupke!" lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, music by Leonard Bernstein, published by G. Schirmer, New York, 1959.
  - 3 Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2d ed., Harper & Row, New York, 1970, p. 38.
  - 4 Abraham Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review*, Vol. 50, 1943, p. 381.
  - 5 *Ibid.*, p. 382.